

# CROSSING THRESHOLDS: A REALITY?

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Women across the continents have been bestowed upon with the responsibility of the home and hearth for centuries. The responsibility has now become a part of her psyche so much so that any distance from fulfilment of the duty leads to a strong guilt feeling in her. On this background when during early 19<sup>th</sup> century women decided to step out to demand their right of standing equal, it sent shock waves across the various strata of the society. The Indian subcontinent has always served the reputation of being culturally rich. However as anywhere else in the world the responsibility of protecting, nurturing, preserving and passing the culture has been looked upon as primarily feminine duties. It is ultimately on her shoulder that the burden of culture finally rests and feels secured.

The domestic threshold for the female of the subcontinent has almost been the boundary of their existence. To cross it was to tread onto the path where the fear of unknown was very strong but equally compelling was her desire to explore and expand her horizon and most importantly to prove a point to her counterparts about her capability which was always doubted upon. It has positively instilled a faith of self-esteem, a sense of being and to top it all a sense of belongingness to her world inside the threshold. Hence we find the characters longing to return to the comfort and security of their home and hearth but not before proving a point to masculine society that she is here to stay, fight and survive not essentially against them but against any force that poses a threat to her world. In this world of hers her home and hearth have a place in the highest echelon. That's her strength as well as her weakness too.

The prominent writer of contemporary India Shashi Deshpande's work has been considered and studied for the feminine aspect of that India where the female voice is growing louder and louder to demand their rights. In order, both to gain equality and to realize their human potential, women must transcend their distinctive femaleness to lead the

kind of life men do, in other words, they must be autonomous. This argument may apply in case of Manjari, the protagonist of the novel *‘Moving On’* of Shashi Deshpande as she negotiates many opposed discourses and moves forward and backward in quest to know who and what she is.

Manjari displays enormous courage and steadfastness in her decision to give up studying medicine to marry Shyam, and again during such trying moments when it is revealed that her sister Malu is made pregnant by her husband. When Malu dies after giving birth to Sachi, followed by Shyam’s suicide, Manjari faces a painful period of struggle and strain. Estranged from family, living among strangers, she grapple with innumerable difficulties to support herself, to survive with her baby son: “I had no time to brood or grieve. It was down to the basics: work, eat, sleep, wake up, goback to work. . .” (213).

Manjari prefers to live on her own and refuses financial assistance from her father. Later when she is back with him after her mother’s death, she drinks uninhibitedly in his presence and in the company of her cousin Raja. She turns down Raja’s repeated proposals to marry him and to make the two establishments’ one, because marriage without the foundation of love and only as a means of social security for a single woman is not acceptable to her. Besides, she is too familiar with the curves of his body to feel erotically aroused, as they grew up together. Since she decides not to get into marriage again, neither persuasion nor other considerations – physical, financial, emotional – can prevail on her.

She shocks Raja, the upholder of patriarchal norms, by learning to drive her car and even trying to run it as a taxi, by installing and operating a computer at home and typing out manuscripts for others as a means of self-employment when she fails to find out a satisfying job. Her real test, however, begins when visiting strangers and anonymous phone calls from the mafia underworld subject her to psychological pressure and coerce her to sell out her ancestral house. She is even physically assaulted, almost on the verge of rape, to give in. Stubbornly she decides to stay and fight, against Raja’s concern and advice, and refuses to succumb to pressure: “This is what they want, they’re trying to reduce me to this shivering cowardly mass of fear. I won’t be scared.”(167) She disapproves Raja’s role of the protecting male in her life: “I want the brakes under my feet, not someone else’s. I don’t want a dual control, the control should be mine, mine alone.” (88) And later she dismisses her driver, telling him, “I’m quite capable of looking after myself.” Although both children want her to marry Raja, she feels she has gone too far, from where she can’t go back (191). Manjari’s

struggle for freedom and for being autonomous is theoretically a challenge to patriarchy, not confronting it headlong but in discovering one's own strength as a woman.

The title of the novel itself indicates that moving on is a detour, it is both a journey from within to without and from without to within. The struggle for freedom still remains vital for women as an ideal to be achieved and the theme of autonomy, selfhood and self-realization still forms an integral part of contemporary feminist writing.

In almost all societies, a woman is culturally assigned norms of behaviour in which standards of conduct, taste and decorum set the boundaries for her as external signs of what it means to be seemingly proper and respectable within the differentiated hierarchy called gender. Any form of deviation from prescribed norms or any display of transgressive potential in violation to the ideal image of womanhood makes her an unruly woman to be ostracized by society. For Beauvoir, as Bartky points out, the situation of woman is such that she, a free and autonomous being, finds herself in a world where she is compelled by man to assume the status of an inferior to whatever man imagines himself to be. Women are bound to their oppression "by male control of the dominant institutions and the dominant ideology, by women's lack of solidarity with one another, by the biological necessity that requires coupling, by the very antiquity of oppressive arrangements that make them appear natural, hence unalterable and sometimes by women's complicity" (Bartky, 1998: 322). Hence, in order both to gain equality and to realize their human potential, women must transcend their distinctive femaleness to lead the kind of life men do, in other words, they must be autonomous. Beauvoir exhorts women to achieve autonomy, to discover and nurture their authentic self through lived experiences for self-realization. This argument may apply in case of Mnjari, as she negotiates many opposed discourses and moves forward and backward in a quest to know who and what she is.

Women can fulfil themselves only when they are not oppressed. In a family men and women should have equal opportunities and privileges, where cooperation, compromises and companionship prevails. In the context of the changing world we live in, it has become imperative to do away with separate domains for woman and man and to redefine man-woman relationship as equal and complimentary and not on terms of domination and subordination. Manjari challenges the sensualised notion of female identity as male fabrication and leaves the door open for social and cultural change. Mnjari is not overprotective of her children and allows them their own space. Her engagements with life

adopt a middle path – be yourself and allow others to be; live on your own terms and let others live on their own.

#### **Work cited**

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